

DOMINI DA MAR

Manifestations of the aquapelagic imaginary in Venetian symbolism and folklore

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ABSTRACT: The concept of the aquapelago, an assemblage of terrestrial and aquatic spaces generated by human activities, was first advanced in 2012 and has been subsequently developed with regard to what has been termed the ‘aquapelagic imaginary’ – the figures, symbols, myths and narratives generated by human engagement with such assemblages. Venice, a city premised on the integration of terrestrial and marine elements within an intermediate tidal lagoon, is a paradigmatic aquapelago and its artists have produced a substantial corpus of creative work reflecting various aspects of its *Domini da Mar* (maritime dominion). This article engages with one aspect of these engagements, the use of *sirenas* (mermaids), sea serpents, Neptune and associated motifs in visual and narrative culture from the Renaissance to the present. This subject is explored in a reverse chronological order. Commencing with a discussion of two striking contemporary sculptures, the article goes on to analyse modern renditions of Venetian folklore before moving back to explore a variety of Renaissance paintings and sculptures that feature mythic maritime motifs. Having followed this trajectory, the article shifts focus to examine the manner in which the prominence of the winged Lion of Saint Mark in Venetian iconography counteracts the aforementioned aquatic imagery, reflecting different perceptions of Venice as a social locale and as regional and international power at different historical junctures.

KEYWORDS: Venice, mermaids, *sirenas*, sea-serpents, Neptune, Lion of Saint Mark,

Introduction

The concept of the aquapelago, an assemblage of terrestrial and aquatic spaces generated by human activities, was first floated in the Debates section of *Shima* v6 n2 in 2012 and has since been developed to address various types of communities and livelihood activities.¹ One recent strand, explored by Hayward (2016), Suwa (2017) and various contributors to *Shima*'s 2018 themed issue on ‘Mermaids and Mercultures’ (v12 n2), has explored the notion of there being an *aquapelagic imaginary* that manifests itself in various ways at different historical junctures. In essence, the concept proposes that human engagements with integrated terrestrial and marine spaces have been inscribed within the imaginary of the societies concerned and have been expressed through various cultural artefacts and practices. The concept of the imaginary invoked here is one derived from Castoriadis (1987) and developed by Gaonkar (2002) with regard to stories and symbols generated by societies that are

¹ See *Shima*'s online anthology (nd) for a compilation of articles on aquapelagos. The Wikipedia page on aquapelagos (2020) also gives a succinct and accurate introduction to the concept.

“imaginary in a double sense: they exist by virtue of representation or implicit understandings” and express how individuals and the societies they operate within “understand their identities and their place in the world” at particular historical junctures (ibid: 14). Hayward (2016) and contributors to *Shima* v12 n2 have characterised mermaids, mermen and related entities as the product of imaginative engagements with aquapelagic locales and have asserted that, once constituted in such circumstances, these figures can circulate more broadly due their particular symbolic polyvalence. The latter arises from the complexity of their interspeciality (as conjoined fish/human entities) and gender ambiguities arising from the absence of genitalia on their tails. They slide between various binary categories and, consequently, have been deployed for a wide range of symbolic purposes by different agencies and constituencies. The historical context of such deployments and perceptions is particularly pertinent since symbols and narratives can be developed and used in specific periods before slipping into dormancy, only to be reactivated in subsequent contexts. Lucy Guenot’s 2017 artwork ‘Brexit Wrexit’ and her subsequent reflection on it (2018) exemplify the latter, animating the lion-ship symbol of Britain’s Cinque Ports (dating back to the 14th Century) to engage in symbolic combat with mermaids (representing the European Union) in the space of the English Channel/La Manche.

Prior to this theme issue of *Shima* (v15 n2), Island Studies had largely neglected Venice as an object of study, preferring to concentrate on oceanic islands. As a result, the city and its lagoon space have not been discussed as an aquapelago nor has its cultural heritage been considered as expressing aspects of an aquapelagic imaginary. This engages with the latter topic, focussing on representations of *sirenas* (mermaids), sea-serpents and Neptune and the role these have played in Venetian culture since the Renaissance. Balancing this deliberate skew to symbols that might be seen to exemplify aspects of aquapelagic imaginary, the essay concludes by acknowledging *the* pervasive symbol of Venetian identity, the winged Lion of Saint Mark, exploring the manner in which that symbol relates to the aquapelagic base of Venetian power and accomplishment.

I. At the nexus: Punta della Dogana

For all that Venice’s wateriness is inescapable, and is its defining characteristic, the city possesses few striking monumental symbols of its aquatic heritage. As a result, when British artist Damien Hirst exhibited his blue mermaid sculpture (Figure 1) outside the Punta della Dogana in 2017 it provided a notable re-introduction of the folkloric creature into the contemporary cityscape.² Indeed, if anything, its visual prominence, at the junction of the Grand and Giudecca canals, highlighted the manner in which the city’s heritage and identity is represented by a very different figure, the winged Lion of Saint Mark, visible as a motif at the top of the window arch behind photograph of the sculpture in Figure 1 and commemorated more ostentatiously 250 metres north west of the Punta della Dogana in the form of a bronze statue on top of a granite column in the piazza that bears its name. Unlike Warsaw or Copenhagen, where the mermaid has become (respectively) the official and vernacular emblem of the cities,³ her presence in contemporary Venetian culture is so pale that she is almost spectral, only manifesting in the form of individual revellers’ costumes at

² This is not to assert that this was intentional on the artist’s part but was, nevertheless, the result.

³ See Wasilewski and Kostrzewa (2018) for a discussion of the *syrenka* (mermaid) as the symbol of Warsaw.

Venice's annual Carnevale.⁴ In this context, ornate mermaids appear alongside a range of other fanciful, masked figures promenading through the city, fleetingly emerging from a sea of Venetian, Italian and international revellers. Fittingly, in the above regard, Hirst's sculpture was not presented as an iconic representation of the city but was, instead, briefly installed in its waterfront location as part of an exhibition of artefacts supposedly rescued from the remnants of a ship that was wrecked off the coast of East Africa 2000 years ago. The exhibition, entitled 'Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable,' was developed by Hirst over an extended duration for exhibition in Venice as a postmodern reflection of the city's history of receiving artefacts from around the Mediterranean, Middle East and Asia and its resignification and re-branding of them as elements and/or emblems of the city-state's culture.⁵



Figure 1 – Damien Hirst's blue mermaid sculpture, installed outside the Punta della Dogana museum (photo by Luisella Romeo, 2017).

⁴ See, for example, the figures photographed by Ursula Kuprat and e-Venise online at: <https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/572379433867227919/> - accessed 14th September 2020.

⁵ The exhibition ran at Punta Della Dogana and the Palazzo Grassi in 2017 and several of its items, including the blue mermaid, have recently been installed on the shores of the River Thames at Greenwich, in London (see discussion in *The Peninsularist*, 2020: online). The Venetian exhibition was subsequently complemented by the production and release of an eponymous spoof documentary film directed by Sam Hobkinson and screened on Netflix in 2018.

Hirst has identified the mermaid statue as particularly significant in terms of his exhibition's depiction of the grand aspirations of an art collector intent on acquiring and commissioning works from various cultures in pursuit of lavish monumentalism (see, for instance, his comments in *The Peninsulist*, 2020⁶). In terms of the artist's professed intentionality, at least, the mermaid symbolised both the intensity of masculine love for a woman and – through its dissonant details, such as the blue-ringed octopus that curls about her tail and the crabs that cling to her hair – the errant elements and threats that underlie such intense devotion.

Seemingly by accident,⁷ the installation of Hirst's mermaid statue outside the Punta della Dogana museum complemented local folklore concerning a cavity under the museum building. The cavity is reputedly home to a large sea serpent with a head like a horse that occasionally surfaces during dark nights when the moon has waned to its lowest ebb (leading it to be known as the *mostro delle acque nere* – 'monster of the black waters'). The folkloric entity is notable for residing in such a busy and highly constructed location (mythical sea serpents being more usually being associated with remote caves or open oceans) and its legend has been refreshed in modern times by sightings such as one reputed to have been made in the 1930s. Popular Venetian author Alberto Toso Fei has reported the latter encounter in the following terms:

two fishermen - fishing for squid with the aid of a small lamp - saw the monster just a few yards from their boat. As they recall, the monster opened its mouth so wide that it was able to swallow a seagull whole before trying to kill others and returning to the bottom of the sea. With a diameter of about one yard at its widest point its mouth was lined with white saw-like teeth. As it moved, the creature's body undulated rhythmically while its head appeared to rest on the surface of the water. (2009: 88 – author's translation)

While this legend is not celebrated in statuary on the shore above its reputed lair, it was memorably represented in material form as the result of a collaboration between architect Simona Marta Favrin and glassmaker Nicola Moretti, working with the Venetian fountain makers Forme D'Acqua. Inspired by Toso Fei's account of the *mostro*, the work they produced consists of a large, 6.5 metre long skeleton overlaid with a skin of glass scales hand crafted by Moretti using traditional methods developed by Murano glassmakers. The completed work represents part of the serpent's breaching body and has been exhibited partially sunk within a shallow pool of water with a program setting off flashing LEDs at various points of the *mostro's* body to give it the appearance of life (Figure 2). The installation was previewed at the Tenuta Agricola di Cavallino Treporti in Venice in February 2011 before being exhibited in June at the Magazzini del Sale, in conjunction with

⁶ *For the Mermaid, I imagined the collector had fallen in love with a woman and commissioned a sculpture of her... The great thing about Treasures was you could reference all these contemporary things, but it was an ancient artwork, so you predated them. You could take anything from anywhere, and instead of stealing from them, they stole it from this ancient work, here! I wanted to play with ideas of authenticity... I think the Mermaid represents the gullibility of the collector. He was gullible in his ideas, in his tastes. The whole idea that the collection disappeared without a trace, and all his treasures were lost, his dream was futile – it speaks to everyone's successes and failures. Maybe the Mermaid sums that up more than the other works. (The Peninsulist, 2020: online)*

⁷ Neither Hirst nor any of his associates have identified any knowledge of – and thereby conscious engagement with – the lagoon's serpent myth.

the 54th Venice Biennale. Forme d'Acqua have described the work as representing “a new form of expression to create communication and interaction between two ancient, opposite materials” innately connected with Venetian history and culture, “water and glass” (2020: online). Expanding on this, they characterise the installation as a Futuristic re-invigoration of a folkloric entity through creating a cyborg composed of myth and material:

Featuring an exclusive technological soul that lives through a pulsing heart and breathing in water, the lagoon monster lives its own life, hanging halfway between earth, air and sea. (ibid)



Figure 2 – ‘Il Mostro della Laguna’ installation (Forme D’Acqua, nd).

Like the *mostro* itself, the cyborg installation has surfaced at various venues since first being sighted in Venice in 2011, including at Murano’s Museum of Glass in 2016-2017.⁸ In a further animation of the *mostro*, it was even given a “deep abyssal voice (“la voce profonda che riemerge dagli abissi”) by sound designers. This voice is mixed in with a skeletal electronica track in Jean Blanchaert’s time-lapse video *Il Mostro della Laguna* (2016), showing the construction of the *mostro* installation at the Villa dei Vescovi in Padua in 2016. Pitched at the bottom end of the human vocal range (resembling the guttural sounds generated by Turkic throat singers), the sound has an anthropomorphic element, giving the myth character and suggesting sentience. Indeed, it is as if the *mostro* has emerged from a long silent period – in both folklore and in its aquatic lair – and finally found its voice.⁹ Yet, for all this, the *mostro* is essentially a postmodern ‘pet’ in such contexts, evidencing a playful engagement with a scary folkloric tale on the part of its creators and those who choose to exhibit and promote it. The *Mostro* installation also reflects a broader contemporary engagement with Venetian folklore that has been prompted by the work of (the

⁸ The serpent is still extant and Forme d’Acqua’s website indicates that it is available for hire.

⁹ In this regard the video invites an intertextual association for Italian speakers, as Jack Arnold’s 1954 feature film *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, featuring an aquatic humanoid, was released in Italy as *Il Mostro della Laguna Nera*.

aforementioned) Alberto Toso Fei and a related interest in exploring the city's 'darker' secrets in fiction such as Busato (2016) and historical works such as Nosenghi (2010) and, more recently, Pavanetto (2020).

Toso Fei, who was born into a long-established family of glass blowers on Murano, has produced a number of popular books about Venetian folklore and history (2000, 2004, 2005, 2009) and is founding artistic director of the Veneto Spettacoli di Mistero ('Mysterious Venetian Spectacles'), an annual festival that debuted in 2009 and has continued to the present.¹⁰ Toso Fei's various projects have largely engaged with versions of older stories and superstitions that circulated in the city in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, rather than the type of pre-modern and largely rural oral folklore gathered internationally by earlier, pioneer fieldworkers.¹¹ This is, in substantial part, due to the lack of a residual pre-modern culture in a city that has thrived on artifice, innovation and the resignification of imported goods and practices for over 800 years. Put simply, there is little antecedent, pre-modern folklore lurking in the nooks and crannies of the inhabited inner lagoon – and, if there is, it is likely to be so intermingled with more modern inflections that its residual form and details would be near-impossible to extract. And what would be the point? In a city of artifice, folklore is as 'artificial' as any other cultural form. Toso Fei's books and the festival thereby conform to cultural tradition by using a significant degree of interpretive licence. Appropriately in this regard, Toso Fei's published *sirena* narratives are discussed below in terms of their thematics and their relationship to Venetian cultural history rather than in terms of any fidelity to an (undisclosed) pre-modern oral tradition or to previous written versions of it.

II. Split Tales: Venice's *Sirena* narratives

While there has been substantial study of the *anguane* (inland water nymphs) of the Veneto hinterland and their commemoration in medieval music (Perco, 1997), there has been surprisingly little scholarly research into Venetian *sirenas* (a Latin and modern Italian term that refers to mermaids and related entities) or other fantastic aquatic creatures. As a result, there has been no discussion of the extent to which literary fictions concerning such creatures have been assimilated within the city's two well-known *sirena* narratives (discussed further below). The work of Giovanni Francesco Straparola is particularly pertinent for such considerations. Born in Caravaggio around 1485, he arrived in Venice around twenty years later and published verses and short narrative pieces in the city before writing his best-known work, the two-volume set *Le Piacevoli Notti* ('The Entertaining Nights') in 1551 and 1553. This is often identified as the first published compendium of what later became known as 'fairy tales' (Bottigheimer, 2002). One of Strapola's stories is of particular relevance to this article. 'Fortunio and Doralice' concerns a young orphan who is cursed by his foster mother after he rejects her, telling him that if he ever ventures on to the sea he will be dragged down into its waters by a *sirena*. After various adventures he arrives in a city named Polonia and marries a beautiful princess named Doralice before growing restless and venturing to sea to seek adventure and fortune. Just as the curse had foretold, he encounters a *sirena* who mesmerises him with her song and drags him down to her undersea lair. When Doralice hears of her husband's plight she resolves to find and free him. Arriving at the spot where he disappeared, she finds the *sirena* and persuades her to bring Fortunio to the surface by

¹⁰ See the festival website for details of the goals and key personnel involved in the festival.

¹¹ Although the festival, in particular, has also explored more conventional folkloric themes and topics, particularly in events held in the rural and mountainous areas of Veneto.

bribing her with bronze, silver and golden apples. Briefly emerging from the water after the final gift, he manages to escape and returns home with his wife. At the end of the tale Doralice provides a description of her adversary that prefigures descriptions of *sirenas* in many subsequent stories:

She is very fair to look upon, for her head and breast and body and arms are those of a beautiful damsel, but all the rest of her form is scaly like a fish, and in her nature she is cunning and cruel. She sings so sweetly that the mariners, when they hear her song, are soothed to slumber, and while they sleep she drowns them in the sea. (Straparola, nd: online)

While not set in Venice, the story's maritime theme is obviously appropriate to a city known for its merchant fleet and the aspirations of its young men to profit from maritime enterprise. The apples can be regarded as a form of ransom payment, of a type well-known in a city whose mariners and merchants were frequently detained in the eastern and southern Mediterranean in this period. The story also emphasises the binding commitment of marriage, a theme that recurs in different manners in Venice's two established *sirena* tales.

One of the tales is associated with Burano island and is notable for ascribing magical origins to its distinctive lace-making culture. Burano, located in the northern part of the Venetian Lagoon, seven kilometres north west of the central islands clustered around the Grand Canal, is known for its brightly coloured houses and its history as a centre for fishing and lace making (Sciama, 2003). Local lace making appears to have commenced in the 14th Century and the practice and tools were probably imported from Cyprus, an island that Venice had traded with since around 1000 CE and which it assumed control of in 1489. Cypriot lace production was centred on the village of Lefkara and, indeed, continues to be, with the village receiving UNESCO recognition in 2009 for its intangible heritage practices. The latter have been characterised as reflecting the complex history of the region by combining elements of "indigenous craft, the embroidery of Venetian courtiers... and ancient Greek and Byzantine geometric patterns" (UNESCO, 2009: online). But while the origins of local lace making have a credible historical explanation in terms of the traffic of commodities, techniques and fashions between Venice's trading outposts and its imperial centre, a different account continues to circulate in Venetian folklore and in restatements of this in tourism information and in related internet fora.

The story of the origin of Venetian lace making currently exists in two versions. The first, and most commonly circulated, concerns a fisherman from Burano, who is deeply in love and betrothed to be married to a local girl. While out fishing – either in the lagoon or out at sea – he encounters a group of *sirenas* who sing their (usually irresistible) songs to him. Unmoved, he continues to fish. Impressed by the fisherman's dedication to his terrestrial sweetheart, the *sirenas* give him a gift of delicate lacy fabric (in some versions a veil) to take home as a gift. After presenting it to his fiancée, who marvels at its quality, she and other local women attempt to approximate its fine filigree and thereby initiate the tradition of local lace making. This tale is unusual in two regards. First, in the canon of European folklore, such as that represented by the Arne-Thompson Motif-index (1955–1958), it is a relatively rare example of *sirenas* bestowing gifts upon mortal males.¹² Indeed, in Italian mythology *sirenas* primarily appear as malevolent entities performing the role ascribed to them in *The Odyssey*, namely of distracting sailors with their beguiling songs and luring

¹² It should however be noted that this Index is largely addressed to north-western European folk tales.

them to their deaths. As their name suggests, the Sirenasus islands, off Italy's Amalfi Coast, have been closely associated with this legend and Naples also has a myth of origins, derived from ancient Greek sources,¹³ that involves the city springing from the corpse of Parthenope, one of the *sirenas* whose charms were resisted by Ulysses (who famously had himself tied to the mast of his ship while his crew rowed passed the *sirenas* with their ears stopped with wax). One version of the tale sees Parthenope as so devastated by his successful strategy that she dies and her body is washed ashore on Megaride islet, close to shore, where her flesh transformed into landscape (and with the islet becoming conjoined with the mainland).¹⁴ The Burano tale repeats the characterisation of the *sirenas*' beguiling musicality but deviates from the scenario described in *The Odyssey* by having a male hero whose emotional integrity and commitment grants him the fortitude necessary to resist them.

Toso Fei has provided the most detailed literary rendition of the tale, referring to *sirenas* as mermaids in the English language version reproduced below and giving the fisherman and his betrothed the names Nicolò and Maria. As an extract relates:

He had just thrown out his nets when he thought he heard a sound, a sort of music, distant but very sweet. He stopped to listen: silence. Then suddenly, the sound returned more enchanting than ever: it was not music, it was a song, so magnetic as to capture you inside it and make you feel like you never wanted to leave there again...

Then he saw them: there were two of them, no five, no... more. Stunning. The most beautiful women that Nicolò had ever seen. An entire group of mermaids had surrounded the boat and continued to sing the song that the young man would have liked to keep within him for the rest of his life. They did not pronounce a single word; they said nothing. But the sound that came out of their mouths, as well as the beauty of their eyes, was more than any man could ever desire. Then, at first like an indefinable feeling that came from the heart, and then as a precise image that appeared to his mind's eye, the fisherman saw before him the vision of a single face: that of his beloved Maria. A vision that did not abandon him through all the seemingly eternal moments that followed; the song was deep inside him, but deeper still was something that mitigated its power, that countered its irresistible strength: his love for Maria. At the end, the mermaids suddenly fell silent. To them, what had happened was very clear, and it was just as clear that they could have continued singing all day without breaking through to the young man's soul. They had lost their battle against an earthly young woman. But they did not lose their spirit. On the contrary, one of them swam closer to the boat and began speaking to Nicolò: "it is so rare to come across the power of love" – she said to him – "that we had almost forgotten the look in the eyes of someone who can experience such an overwhelming feeling. Here, as a sign of our appreciation, we would like to leave you this gift. Take it to your beloved, and if she deserves your love as we think she does, she will learn to draw its reward."

¹³ An alternative version has the city formed from Parthenope's body after she was punished for falling in love with a satyr, who was transformed into Mount Vesuvius.

¹⁴ See Gallipi (2016) for an analysis of the reworking of these themes in Elena Ferrante's fiction.

Thus, Nicolò found himself holding a magnificent work of embroidery, of incomparable delicacy, created with the foam of the sea. The mermaids had gone: the young man rowed quickly back home. (Toso Fei, 2020)

Toso Fei's rendition of the tale combines standard mythological elements (concerning the power of the *sirenas'* song) with the Christian theme of overcoming temptation¹⁵ and implicitly alludes to Venetian female choral traditions. The religious aspect of Toso Fei's account, in particular, is crystallised by Nicolò's vision of Maria which, like visions of her namesake, the Virgin Mary, guide him through tribulation. The latter aspect is far from incidental given the veneration of the Virgin Mary in Venice (manifested throughout the city, most notably in the Basilica di San Marco and in Titian's painting of her ascension in the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari [1515-1518]). By contrast, the theme of solidarity between mermaids and mortal women, and the rewarding of Nicolò through a gift intended for Maria is more unusual and suggests itself as having a more modern origin than the other themes. Toso Fei's heady description of the *sirenas'* rich song also resonates with the 17th-18th Century tradition of *ospedale* singing. *Ospedali* were charitable institutions that housed female orphans and one of their peculiarities in Venice was the high emphasis placed on developing the musical abilities of their young women. Along with instrumentals skills, a number of girls at the four main institutions (known as the *Ospedali Grande*) became so skilled in choral performance within their institutions that Venetians and visitors would fill the laneways and canals around the *ospedali* and churches they performed at in order to hear their pure and evocative voices. As Tonelli (2003: 30-57) elaborates, the sensual and seductive nature of their song led visitors and commentators to compare them to captivating *sirenas* and to fantasise about the beauty of the singers.¹⁶ Toso Fei's re-telling of the tale gives its *sirenas* similar abilities, thereby cross-associating the two traditions.

Minor variations on the standard story in contemporary circulation include accounts of the delicate lace fabric as being created from seafoam lashed into being by the *sirenas'* tails (eg Isola di Burano, nd) but a more significant variation occurs in accounts that remove the *sirenas* and theme of resisted temptation and rewarded virtue from the narrative. The latter variants instead represent lace making as inspired by different type of sailor's gift. The various versions of this online (such as González, 2015 and Morelli, 2016) appear to derive from a lengthy and detailed article published in the American *Century Illustrated and Monthly Magazine* in 1882 that quotes extensively from correspondence with the Contessa Adriana Marcello. The article identifies the "received Venetian legend" of the foundation of Burano lace making as follows¹⁷:

A sailor youth, returning from southern seas, brought to his betrothed a bit of the sea plant familiarly known as "mermaid's lace," and called by Linnaeus the Kalimedia opuntia.¹⁸ The fond maiden saw with grief that the love-gift of her affianced was destined to crumble and perish and, in order to preserve at least

¹⁵ As notably represented in Hieronymus Bosch's triptych painting "The Hermit Saints" (c1492) which hung in Venice's Palazzo Ducale until removed by the city's Austrian occupiers in 1796 before being returned in 1919.

¹⁶ Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau notably declared that "I cannot imagine anything so voluptuous, so touching as this music" following a visit to the city (1741: online). Also see Gordon (2006).

¹⁷ Given that the article alludes to correspondence with Contessa Marcello, and otherwise appears well-researched, it is likely that the version of the folkloric account related in the article was derived from Italian sources rather than being purely the author's own invention.

¹⁸ Now referred to as *Halimedia Opuntia*, a heavily calcified form of algae found in subtropical waters.

a record, succeeded after many efforts in copying it skillfully with her needle and thread. This graceful imitation of the sea-weed produced the charming fabric that was destined later to be counted among the precious possessions of emperors and kings. (Cornaro, 1882: 336)

Further research needs to be undertaken to establish which of the two versions – mysterious provision by *sirenas* or a less prosaic sailor’s gift – predated the other in Buranese and/or Venetian folklore or whether they co-evolved in some manner that is now obscure. But whichever version precedes the other, both tales can be seen to perform a cultural-ideological operation whereby the antecedence of the practice of lace making in Cyprus is elided by either supernatural origins or else via the imitation of a natural form. Both accounts thereby localise the practice of lace making in an aquapelagic context and appropriate it as a distinctly Venetian form. An intriguing element of complexity (akin to the Venetian practice of ceremonial mask-wearing) is also provided to the account reproduced above by dint of the author of the *Century Illustrated* article writing under the pseudonym ‘Catherine Cornaro.’ The latter is the anglicised form of the name of an educated Venetian noblewoman (*Caterina* Cornaro) who became Queen of Cyprus in 1473 by marrying its king, James II, thereby cementing an alliance between the two states. She ruled in her own right until 1488 when the Venetian Republic forced her to abdicate, with Cyprus being deeded to Venice. Upon her return she became a celebrated patron of the arts. At a remove of 140 years it is difficult to guess the American author’s motives in choosing such a pseudonym and/or the perspective she intended such an identity to bring to bear on the account, but it nevertheless provides another layer of historical intrigue to the tale.

While it is unclear as to when the *sirena* story (or the somewhat less romantic account provided by Cornaro) came to be associated with Burano lace and, as pertinently, with its promotion and marketing; the association clearly promoted the product’s other-worldly delicacy. In this regard, it is not inconceivable that the mermaid story was consciously originated (as an example of what has been referred to as either *fakelore* [Dorson, 1976] or the folkloresque [Dyland Foster, 2016]) – to glamourise the product.¹⁹ Indeed, there have been similar exercises in Japan with regard to the promotion of black pearls from Ishigaki (Japan) with reference to local *ningyo*/mermaid legendry (Hayward, 2018: 64) and, more recently, through the fabrication of local folklore concerning a sea-hag to promote craft beer in New England in 2006 (Martin, 2007). While the Burano story may have entered local folklore in its own right – rather than as the simple reiteration of a marketers’ fiction – another, more recent, initiative invented a folkloric association for sponges, a product traded through the city since the late Medieval period (Figure 3).

Although sponges occur in the Venetian lagoon, the types traditionally marketed by Venetian merchants have been harvested from locations such as the Dalmatian-Adriatic coast and the Dodecanese islands (Pronzato and Marconi, 2008: 149). As a fairly unprepossessing object, in visual terms, and as a primary product with little variation from one supplier to another, marketing provided one clear means of product differentiation. The strategy adopted by Benedetto Brignone & Figli around 1914 has clear parallels to the previously mentioned examples of mermaid marketing. As Figure 3 makes apparent, the association of a sponge with a glamorous, red-haired *sirena* swimming up to the surface with her cargo adds symbolic value. Artist L. Buttin’s seemingly simple image also invites reading in terms of the *sirena’s labour*, in that the sponge is large and appears to be heavy, requiring

¹⁹ It is also notable that the production of patterned silk, a Venetian speciality, was given a sensual, maritime association by being referred to as *dar’onda all’amor* (‘making waves upon the sea’).

her to strain to carry it. In this manner, Brignone's image suggest the product as harvested by supernatural beings who are part of the extended aquapelagic assemblage of the city gathering the product for the delectation of discerning customers. The trade routes underlying the supply of the product dissolve in favour of Venetian mystique. Circulated throughout Italy, the poster linked its *sirena* with Venice's watery locale, echoing the *sirenas* shown in very different contexts in Venetian Renaissance art.



Figure 3 – advertisement for Brignone sponges (*spugne*) (artwork by L. Buttin, c1914).

Venice's second well-known *sirena* tale concerns a shape-shifting individual named Melusina. The tale is a variant of a widespread European story type that involves a male human courting and/or marrying a woman who has a secret identity that she periodically transitions to. While there are a variety of such alternate identities, mermaids, selkies (seal-women) and serpents are common. The best-known example of such a story, a literary rendition that was echoed in subsequent folklore, was Jean d'Arras's *Le Roman de Mélusine ou L'Histoire de Lusignan* (1393) often simply referred to as *Melusine*. The story concerned a young woman named Melusine who was the daughter of a faerie, named Presine, and Elinas, King of Scotland. The mother and daughter fell out over the latter's treatment of her father and Presine put a curse on her daughter that caused the lower half of her body to transform

into a serpent's tail every Saturday. Despite this impediment she agreed to marry a noble, named Raymondin, on the express condition that she could spend every Saturday in seclusion. The arrangement seemed to work since she bore him ten sons and brought fertility and prosperity to the region her husband administered. But the relentless good fortune that surrounded Melusine invited suspicion and Raymondin reneged on his agreement by spying on her one Saturday. After seeing her serpentine lower half, he fled and informed others of his wife's odd condition. When she became aware that the news had spread, she transformed into a dragon and left her husband, never to return. D'Arras's tale was widely popular in the 15th and 16th centuries and the name 'Melusine' also became associated with mermaids, particularly the split-tailed form²⁰ identified by Luchs (2010) in Venetian Renaissance iconography.²¹

The Venetian variant of the tale, which features a protagonist named Melusina, combines various aspects of the above. While some versions are vague about locales, Toso Fei's recent rendition of the tale (2020) specified its male protagonist as a fisherman named Orio, living in the Bragora, on Castello (just west of the Canal de le Galeazze), and as having a fateful encounter whilst fishing with a hand net off Malamocco, on Lido (Venice's north-eastern barrier island). Pulling in a heavy net, he found a beautiful young *sirena* and became smitten with her, meeting her every night on the beach. The couple fell in love and Melusina agreed to lose her fish-tail and adopt a fully human form in order that they might marry and raise a family. But like her earlier namesake, she put a caveat on their relationship that her suitor, like the lover in d'Arras's tale, breaks. The Venetian story has Melusina seeking privacy on Saturdays when she transforms into a serpent (for unspecified reasons). But Orio quickly breaks the agreement and spies a sea serpent in their habitual meeting place who reveals herself to be Melusina. His trauma is however eased by her revelation that marriage will lift her curse, as it does, with the marriage proceeding happily and with Melusina bearing three (human) children. But the idyllic marriage ends when appears to sicken and die, requesting to be buried at sea, which he arranges. While adapting to life as a single parent he notices that the house appears to be regularly tidied and his children cared for. While puzzled, he welcomes the mysterious assistance until one Saturday he returns home to find a large serpent in his kitchen and immediately kills it by cutting off its head. From that moment on, his house falls into disrepair and his children deteriorate. Associating the two phenomena, he realises that Melusina had become the serpent and that he had killed his wife.

The tale is interesting for mixing two transformative elements: Melusina's ability to transform from *sirena* to human form (seemingly at will) and the curse that also sees her periodically transform from a *sirena* to a serpent (and not just a demi-serpent, as in the case of the original Melusine narrative) and, later, transform from human to serpent when the magical capacity of marriage to overcome her curse mysteriously expires. Orio is a notably flexible partner in this scenario, appearing to cope with both transformational attributes, showing a devotion to his beloved that sees him rewarded by a good marriage and children and, even after Melusina's apparent death, by the continued care that envelops his home and family. His instinctive but unfortunate decapitation of the serpent breaks the marital spell and leaves him struggling, mourning the wife he has lost. The tale of Orio and Melusina's love is given further poignancy (and precise geographical location) by its association with another folkloric element, that of the heart shaped brick that features in an

²⁰ See Urba, Kemmis and Ridley Elmes (eds) (2017) and Woodcock (2018) for further discussion of d'Arras's tale and the subsequent development of Melusine as a cultural figure.

²¹ See Belger-Krody (2004) for an assertion of the design's origin in Cretan decorative practices.

arch over the Sotoportego dei Preti passageway in Castello (Figure 4). The brick is reputed to bring good luck to lovers who touch it and is featured on walking tours and visited by lovers to this day for this purpose.²² The connection to the Melusina tale is that the brick was supposed to have been placed there, close to the house where Orio and Melusina lived, to immortalise the couple.²³



Figure 4 – Heart shaped brick, Sotoportego dei Preti passageway (photo by Cecilia Staiano, 2020).

III. Renaissance Repertoire

Underlying those mermaid and sea-serpent myths that have lingered to the present in Venice is a rich seam of Renaissance imagery concealed in the pages of books and manuscripts and scattered across buildings and artworks throughout the city. The relatively hidden nature of such images mirrors the condition of upper-class Venetian women during the Renaissance, who were largely confined to the domestic realm while their men conducted the public affairs of a highly patrician city-state (Chojnacki, 2000). The aforementioned body of imagery has been comprehensively detailed in art historian Alison Luch's study *The Mermaids of Venice: Fantastic Sea Creatures in Venetian Renaissance Art* (2010). As she identifies (and as her extensively illustrated book substantiates):

The arts of Renaissance Venice teem with sea monsters. Surfacing in public and private settings, they begin to proliferate in the painted decoration of books printed in Venice around 1470. From then on, Venetian artists who set out to adapt antique imagery to the modern world turned repeatedly to the theme of marine hybrids. (2010: 1)

²² See, for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84NASdIG7JY> and <http://melodys-balcony.blogspot.com/2012/02/v-e-n-e-z-i.html>

²³ Utilising this connection, a Venetian accommodation complex named Melusina Homes features a logo that fuses the imagery of the mermaid's tail and the brick heart in a diamond shape protruding from waves. (See Melusina.homes.com – accessed 14th September 2020.)

While noting that similar images were common throughout Italy at this time, she asserts that hybrid creatures (such as mermaids) “had a unique and natural relevance for a city whose life depended on the sea” (ibid). As true as this may be, she is also admirably balanced in her introduction to a topic that obviously fascinates her, identifying that “most of the works considered here are decorative” (ibid: 4) and occupy a spectrum between “motifs that are simply adapted at random from the ancient repertory to create pleasing antiquarian ornament” (ibid) and ones (such as the stone reliefs at the Palazzo Ducale) that may be identified as having specific symbolic functions (ibid: 113-129). It is notable, in this regard, that mermaids do not feature, even as details, in any variants of the city’s coats-of-arms or in the coats-of-arms of the Doges who served the city in the period 1009-1797.²⁴ The coats-of-arms of the 94 (exclusively) male dignitaries predominantly comprise simple geometric designs, some with motifs such as roses or fleurs-de-lys. Renditions of animals only occur sparingly. Only two of the Doge’s shields show marine creatures. The first, that of Giovanni Dolfin (1356-1361), reflected the incumbent’s name by displaying three stylised golden dolphins arranged horizontally on a blue background. Ludovico Giovanni Manin, the final Doge to serve before the office was abolished in 1797, had a shield showing a stylised sea creature, the hippocampus (a heraldic embellishment of the sea horse) in combination with crowned lions.²⁵

While Luchs’ analyses of aquatic hybridity in Venetian Renaissance culture does not reveal mermaids or related creatures being used as symbols of Venice, or reveal any idiosyncratic uses of mermaids or related creatures in local media, she concludes her study with the observation that:

The allure of mermaids and mermen, in Venice and elsewhere, surely owes much to the conflict implicit in their double nature. They belong to land and sea, beast and human, passion and reason, flesh and spirit. This duality had a political charge in Venice... signalling double dominion over land and water.
(ibid: 184)

Luchs’ reference to “double dominion” refers to the manner in which the Venetian city-state²⁶ conceived itself as having two spheres of influence: the *Domini di Terraferma* (terrestrial domain) and the *Domini da Mar* (maritime domain). The former comprised the present-day Italian region of Veneto and bordering areas and the latter comprised the series of ports, islands and sea routes along the eastern coast of the Adriatic that, together with Cyprus and Crete, formed the relatively stable core of Venice’s aquapelagic empire between the 9th and 18th centuries.²⁷ The management of these two spheres of influence required both different approaches and cohesive and strategic integration. This led to an elegant ceremonial occasion that symbolically renewed the relationship between the two domains. Known as the *Sposalizio del Mare* (‘marriage of the sea’), the event has persisted to the present (albeit in a varied form) and is now a popular part of Venice’s cultural fabric, performed as much for residents as tourists. The event originated around 1000 CE when the

²⁴ These are displayed at Wappenwiki (nd).

²⁵ See Wappenwiki (nd).

²⁶ The core of the Venetian city-state, on the islands and surrounding shores of the lagoon, was referred to as the *Dogado* (‘territory ruled by the Doge’).

²⁷ I specify the “core” here as the extent of Venice’s overseas sphere of influence expanded and contracted at various points, reaching its zenith in the early 13th Century when it gained control over coastal areas of the eastern Byzantine empire, its tendrils of influence extending into the Black Sea and as far north as Crimea.

Doge's flagship led a small fleet out from Lido to commemorate the conquest of Dalmatia and to pray for calm waters in the Adriatic. In 1117 the event changed in character, function and route (Schilling, 2006: 90-94; Visenti, 2008: 95-97) with the Pope supplying a ring that the Doge cast into the sea each Ascension Day in a symbolic wedding of Venice's terrestrial and maritime domains, uttering the Latin phrase "Desponsamus te, mare, in signum veri perpetuaeque domini" ('We wed thee, sea, as a sign of true and everlasting domination').

Schilling has identified that the ceremony:

helped define Venice inwardly, as well as outwardly, by marking the boundary between the lagoon, the internal sea nourishing the canals of the Republic, and the outer sea, the Adriatic. The Doge was rowed in the Republic's ceremonial boat, the bucintoro, exactly to Due Castelli, a point which was of strategic importance because here the outer and inner world defining the city and its territory met. It made visible in a very dramatic manner the boundary of the Venetian territory in the lagoon and the boundlessness of her prerogatives concerning the open sea. (2006: 91-92)

The event is now celebrated by the mayor of Venice and involves boats bedecked with Venetian flags showing the Lion of Saint Mark (discussed further below) travelling out of the inner city in convoy before stopping and performing the ceremony.²⁸

While marginal to Luch's purview, Venetian representations of the Roman god Neptune are also noteworthy for their interpretation of the deity in a specific geo-political context. Given his association with water (and, by association, mariners), and by virtue of being male, Neptune was an obvious figure for representation in Venetian visual media. One significant representation occurred in Jacopo de' Barbari's remarkable and high-detailed representation of the central islands of Venice from (an imagined) aerial viewpoint south of Giudecca made in 1500 (Figure 5).

While the inclusion of mythical figures on and around the margins of maps was common in the Medieval period, de' Barbari's representation of Neptune is particularly significant as both the only such figure represented *within* the cityscape,²⁹ and by virtue of being represented within the diegesis of the image, riding on the back of a stylised dolphin whose forward movement creates ripples on the surface of the Bacino di San Marco, just to the east of Punta della Dogana and south of Piazza San Marco, the epicentre of the city (Figure 5). At the end of his erect trident hangs a banner declaring "Aequora tuens portu resideo hic Neptunus" ('I, Neptune reside here, keeping the waters in this port calm'). In this manner – specifying his *residence* in the harbour – his presence represents far more than an ornate allusive flourish within the otherwise meticulous realism of the print, he is given life and agency within it. Neptune's association with the maritime power of the republic conveys the magnitude of its resource and lends his symbolism to the city as a whole. Howard (1997) has also emphasised the significance of the dolphin in this context. In an article on de' Barbari's print he asserts that the representation of central Venice has been subtly modified to more closely resemble the shape of a dolphin. With regard to this, he notes the significance of the dolphin in Venice in the late 1400s and its resonance with a number of religious themes, leading to its adoption by particular families and individuals and its representations in

²⁸ See Oasis Travel (2012) for video footage of the 2012 event.

²⁹ Mercury, the Roman god of merchants and travellers, appears at the central top of the image (ie outside of its representational vista).

prime sites (ibid: 107-108). In this manner we can see Neptune's significance as amplified by its cross association.



Figure 5 – Detail from de' Barbari's elevated perspective of Venice, showing Neptune astride a dolphin (1500)

As Else has identified, Neptune had “broad-ranging civic associations with the maritime republic” in the 1500s, as represented in a range of statues, including, most notably the paired statues of Mars and Neptune (symbolising military might and naval mastery) created by Jacopo Sansovino that were erected to frame the entrance to the Palazzo Ducale in 1567. Standing with a full flowing beard, Neptune appears as an ageing patriarch, clasping the tail of a dolphin whose head lies between his feet. Indeed, Neptune was so well-entrenched as a symbol of the city state that in 1574 the god featured in an elaborate grotto constructed at the Palazzo Foscari, on the Grand Canal, where actors played the roles of Neptune and his retinue and presided over a parade of ornately decorated boats organised to impress Henri III of France during his visit to the city (Else, 2019: 32). Neptune also appeared shortly after, representing the republic at a major parade held in Florence on a large, horse-drawn float:

Neptune was accompanied by four marine nymphs and four massive hippocamps...The heavily-armed ship bearing the insignia of San Marco and the house of Cappello saluted the audience with cannon fire... Neptune commanded his majestic steeds, led by marine nymphs, to move the boat... so it could be seen from the wooden barrier circling the courtyard, 'to the universal delight of all'. (ibid: 43)

But while Neptune was the subject of another spectacular representation, in the form of a statue outside Venice's Arsenal erected in the late 1600s, the sea god's prominence waned during the century as another figure, that of the winged Lion of Saint Mark, ascended. In the course of this transition, representations of Neptune slipped from symbols of the city's grandiose self-mythologising to evocations of a strained nostalgia for that power. The latter is manifest in Tiepolo's canvas 'Venice receiving homage from Neptune' (c1745) (Figure 6), painted when the state was in decline. In this work Venice is represented as an ermine-clad noble woman reclining, her left hand lightly resting on a docile lion's head. Neptune leans

in from the left, reduced to paying tribute to the state, pouring coins from a cornucopia (a 'horn of plenty'). The association of the god and the receptacle is not simply unusual in an iconographical sense (the one rarely being associated with the other), it also creates a dissonance that suggests the pressure of the decline that state was experiencing. While the cornucopia is a somewhat obscure symbol today, it would have been easily read in the 1700s as the vessel for an abundant flow of (usually) fruit, vegetables, nuts and flowers. Not only does cash pour from the horn (as if from the maw of a slot machine) but Venice is evidently immediately desirous of even more as she indicates that Neptune should depart to obtain further tribute. The work thereby represents a reverse of the powerful combinations of mythic imagery and ascendant statehood represented in de' Barbari's overview of the city some 145 years previously, as Neptune is imposed upon by a feminine (and implicitly decadent) version of a state he once stood as emblematic of.



Figure 6 - 'Venice receiving homage from Neptune', Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (c1745)

IV. Above the Waters: The Winged Lion of St. Mark

The association of Venice with Saint Mark and with the winged lion that came to represent him is well known. Its starting point was a local belief that Saint Mark had visited the Venetian lagoon after Jesus's crucifixion and had encountered an angel who had foretold that it would be the saint's final resting place. In order to gain prestige and political advantage for their city, two Venetian adventurers travelled to Alexandria (in present-day Egypt) in 828 and exhumed and stole the saint's body and brought it to Venice. Fittingly for such a major state asset, the Venetian authorities constructed a basilica to house their new-acquired trophy. After two initial iterations burned down, the current Saint Mark's Basilica was completed in the early 1100s. Along with the saint's supposed visit to Venice, there was a second, subtler connection between the saint and the lagoon-based state in that the four apostolic evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) were associated with water in early Christian art and with early mosaics showing them emerging from rivers. As Griffiths has commented, fittingly, "watery Venice got, with an Evangelist, an appropriately aquatic patron" (2005: 5).

The association of Saint Mark with a winged lion appears to have developed in the early phase of Christianity. It is not clear whether images of winged lions featured in Venetian art and architecture prior to the Republic's acquisition of the Saint's remains but they were certainly prominent from the 12th Century on. Most notably, Saint Mark's Basilica was constructed with a stone carving of the lion on its front gable and a large bronze statue of the lion was assembled around the body of an earlier statue (acquired from an unknown location in the Hellenic empire) and was mounted on top of a column in the Piazza San Marco (Figure 7) (see Scarfi, 1990). These two material icons, installed in the city's central area, were complemented by a series of further representations in a series of flags and in successive iterations of the city's coat of arms, often accompanied by a text in book form proclaiming "Pax tibi Marce, evangelista meus" ('peace be with thee O Mark, my evangelist'). In this manner the Lion of Saint Mark came to symbolise and signify the city, its quasi-corporate establishment and its Mediterranean empire more broadly (Rosand, 2012).



Figure 7 – The Lion of Saint Mark, relief on the front gable of Saint Mark's Basilica
(photograph by Petar Milosevic -
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=9655093>)

As should be apparent, this symbol was markedly different to the *sirenas*, sea-serpents and other fantastic sea creatures that are so obviously complementary to the island city, its encircling lagoon or the broader expanses of the Mediterranean that its trading and military ships crossed. Instead, the lion – particularly represented in the *andante* pose shown on the Basilica gable and the column – suggests the land, on which his four legs rest, and the air, which his wings promise him access to. There appears to have been no formal decision made about adopting the lion as the city-state's 'corporate logo' nor, therefore, nor any rationale for the choice of a non-aquatic symbol, other than the lion's association with the saint. The lion was however effective for a state concerned to symbolise its might and the mobility and spread of its military. The lion, unlike the *sirena*, was also a distinctly male figure and one associated with kingship, nobility and might. In this manner, the winged lion, with its controlled masculine presence and power, solidly anchored to the ground, is the opposite of the fluid *sirena* with her seductive song and/or shape changing abilities. In this manner, the lion can be understood to inhabit and represent the civic space of the built city, in

contrast to the denizens of the lagoon and open seas that lurk at the edges of Venetian sensibilities.

As broadly accurate as the above characterisations may be, there are – as ever in Venice – complicating factors. The first concerns what might be perceived of as a tacit acceptance of the shortcomings of the winged lion as representing the aquaticity of Venice, in that a number of painters, such as Carpaccio (Figure 8), depicted the lion astride the shoreline, his hind legs and tail resting in the lagoon (which a line of ships are sailing through, symbolising Venice’s marine power). The second complication is more idiosyncratic.



Figure 8 - 'The Lion of Saint Mark', Carpaccio (1516)

The lagoon space has also affected Venetian representations of the winged lion in a more complicated manner. While the general figure of the winged lion, in the form shown in Figure 8, is fairly consistent with winged lions representing Mark in early Christian iconography, there is also a specifically Venetian variant in the form of Saint Mark’s Lion represented *in moeca* (Figure 9). *Moeca* is the Venetian word for crab, used to refer to lagoon crabs in their soft moult phase, which were one of the many plentiful foods available to Venetians throughout much of the city’s history. The term *in moeca* refers to a particular splaying out of elements of the lion’s wings in a manner that resembles a crab, seen from above, and results in the lion’s head and front paws emerging from a decorative, one-dimensional frill that gives the figure a very different sense of physicality than the lions whose limbs and trunk are so solidly represented in more orthodox renditions of the figure. While the standard image of Saint Mark’s lion is pervasive in contemporary branding of the city and appears on a wide range of tourist paraphernalia, the lion *in moeca* featured on the shield of the Republic of Venice from 1261 until the mid-14th Century (Figure 9) and is still present as a distinctly Venetian symbol in a number of arts and crafts practices. The Ithaca terra cotta tile company, founded in Venice in the 1990s, for instance, produces a range of bas-relief tiles that utilise traditional Venetian themes, such as images of Saint Mark’s lion *in moeca* (see Figure 10) modelled on a sculpted wooden feature on the roof of the Scuola Grande di San Marco (dating from 1495). The Ithaca’s company website offers a nuanced interpretation of the figure that firmly associates it with Venice’s aquatic traditions:

The animal seems to come out of the water, and so the picture subtly gives the idea that Venice, owing everything just to the sea, is totally independent from any near country, albeit more powerful. (Marciano, nd: online)

This characterisation is particularly notable with regard to the adoption of the lion *in moeca* for the symbol of the Movimento Veneti par la Indipendensa de la Venetia (MV), founded in Padua in 2006 to advocate for increased autonomy for the Veneto region. Despite little support for the MV in Venice itself, the Movement adopted the lion *in moeca* for its symbol in a version is notably different from the standard Venetian one by virtue of having the lion hold a sword in one of its paws, somewhat awkwardly propping up a book showing the classic Venetian motto.³⁰ While not unique in the history of the symbol, the lion *in moeca* with raised sword is notable for suggesting a militancy more usually associated with variations on the standard *andante* winged lion. As such it is a somewhat strained appropriation of a referent image that gained little symbolic traction.



Figure 9 – (Contemporary rendition of) the Shield of the Republic of Venice, used from 1261 until the mid-14th Century (Wappenwiki, nd)

³⁰ Logo online at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venetians_Movement#/media/File:Veneti_Logo.jpg



Figure 10 – Tile with image of Lion of Saint Mark *in moeca* (Ithaca Company, nd)

With regard to the discussion advanced above, it is notable that the sole example of Saint Mark's winged Lion being represented as immersed in water is present in a work by a non-Venetian artist for a non-Venetian patron. The image is present as a detail in one of forty illuminated cartographic panels representing the Italian peninsula and adjacent islands commissioned by Pope Gregory XIII in 1580 and completed by Ignazio Dante in the Vatican over a three-year period as the Galleria delle Carte Geografiche. While cartographically accurate and detailed, Dante's suite of panels also featured embellishments in two main forms, representations of significant events in ecclesiastical history, reflecting the particular context of the commission (Fiorani, 1996) and, albeit sparingly, mythological and symbolic motifs common to cartography in the period. In some instances, such as the representation of the northern Adriatic, discussed below, particular motifs crystallised aspects of regional cultural heritage and symbolism whereas in others they were more generically decorative. The panel representing the northern Adriatic with Venice to its left and Trieste and northern Croatia to its right, featured a striking scenario, showing the winged lion, with St Mark astride its neck and the Virgin Mary perched erect on its spine bearing a crucifix (Figure 11). The lion is shown paddling the waves of the rippling sea towards two stylised dolphins, depicted head-to-head, upon whose back a cherub-like infant reclines against a large scallop shell. In combination, the assemblages converge the two principal different myths of the origins of Venice circulating in the city-state – its founding by Saint Mark as an 'anointed' centre of Christianity and an allusive association with Roman mythology through the birth of Venus from the waves (as celebrated in Botticelli's well-known work of c1480). The association of Venus, and particularly, the circumstances of her birth, was common in the lagoon city during the Renaissance (and was vividly rendered in Francesco Xanto Avelli's ceramic *istoriato*³¹ 'The Triumph of Neptune and Venus, Allegory of Venice' [1533]³²). Dante's panel also has another notable detail. In the north-eastern corner of the Adriatic there's an image of three tritons pulling a raft westward (Figure 12). The raft has a banner flying from

³¹ Glazed ceramic works from this period were referred to as *istoriato* when they represented stories.

³² The work is held in London's Wallace Collection and is represented online at: <https://www.pinterest.de/pin/315533517620708605/> - accessed 10th September 2020.

a mast that refers to “Venetiarum parallelus et meridianus” – the Venetian system of latitude and longitude (see Cosgrove, 1992). The raft bears two cherubs, one representing a captain plotting a route and the other representing a geographer. This image complements the convergent assemblages representing the origins of the city-state and inscribes the navigational prowess of its mariners and of its trade with the eastern Mediterranean.



Figures 11 and 12 – (Details from) panel representing the Adriatic by Ignazio Dante (c1580), Galleria delle Carte Geografiche, Vatican City. (Peter Barritt, nd - Alamy Stock photo, reproduced by licence.)

While successful in summarising dual aspects of Venetian mythology in the details of a regional map commissioned for the Pope, Dante transgressed the unspoken rule of Venetian iconography by placing the lion *in* the sea and also gave fish-tailed tritons a rare iconographical outing in association with the city.³³ If we can characterise the use of various aquatic creatures and characters within Venetian art and public culture as expressing aspects of the city's aquapelagic imaginary, the panel represents Dante's personal interpretation of this. The artist's work represented the maritime accomplishment of an economic powerhouse whose aims, glory and devotion to Catholicism largely complemented the Vatican's (at least, in the period it was painted). From a contemporary perspective, the mythological elements might be regarded as somewhat excessive - it is, perhaps, feasible to perceive the swimming lion as somewhat overburdened by the symbolic weight he carries, and the images of the infant Venice against a scallop shell (evoking the birth of Venus from the waves) and of the city's navigators as cherubs led by tritons might appear more than a little overblown. But such imagery was in keeping with the extravagant celebrations of Italian states and their rulers in the century such as the aquatic pageants that Else (2019) details, and their inscription within the Vatican panel might be better seen to represent Venice's successful projection of its mythology into a broader geo-political arena.

Conclusion

In November 2019 Venice experienced its most severe inundation since the record-breaking floods of November 1963, resulting from the *acqua alta* ('high water') generated by strong winds forcing water into Venice's lagoon and flooding its low-lying islands. While the phenomenon has been known since ancient times, it appears to be happening with increasing frequency and at a greater scale than in previous periods. The 2019 episode was so extreme that a number of tourists took to swimming in the shallow waters covering premium heritage sites such as the Piazza San Marco (Sky News, 2019). The 2019 inundation, severe as it was, was one in a series of periodic reminders of the city's fundamental implication within its lagoon space and of its tenuous (but persistent) liminality between land and water. In this manner, the aquapelagic dimension of the city can be considered not so much a reified element of its social imaginary over the extended duration covered in this survey but as an ever-present aspect of its population's lived experience and of the practicalities of living in such an environment. In these regards, there might be a lack of necessity of invoking folkloric figures such as *sirenas* or sea serpents in order to remember the city's aquapelagic origins. Unlike New York, whose inhabitants were vividly reminded of the city's estuarine location during the inundations resulting from Hurricane Sandy in 2012, Venetian society has long been predicated on the opportunities and vicissitudes presented by its watery locale. All-too aware of the permeability of its material structure and of the capricious nature of its lagoon-space, the *sirena* might be regarded as effectively *too close to home* and too redolent of the city's coastal precarity to serve as a symbol of a solid established civic entity. The (imagined and desired) stability of the Venetian state, in these regards, can be seen to have been better imagined as a winged lion, firmly rooted on the ground through its four paws but, equally, implicitly able to fly above an inundation. In this context, the Lion of Saint Mark *in moeca* represents an attempt to cross-associate the two perceptions and sensibilities and has gained traction as a minor symbol of Venice. However, the curious nature of its meld of lion and crab, rendered as a visual design rather than a credible three-dimensional creature, appears to have limited its wider visualisation in statuary, painting or modern audiovisual media. As a result, the four-legged, winged lion

³³ Thanks to Francesco Vallerani for his discussion of these images.

continues to reign supreme in Venice, easily repelling modern abstractions such as Mathieu Thibaut's single winged rendition of the creature superimposed over a symbolic 'V,' announced as the city's new logo in 2003 (Vela, 2003) but marginal to its visual culture ever since. The *sirenas* represented in Renaissance art and folklore and related figures, remain, at best, an undercurrent within modern Venetian culture, swimming below the surface of its metropolitan consciousness, obscured by the glare of the Lion City's corporate imagery.

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